

Message Text

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 NEW DE 09273 01 OF 02 291444Z
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INFO AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 NEW DELHI 9273

E. O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, IN
SUBJECT: STATE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR

SUMMARY: FOLLOWING A CAMPAIGN MARKED BY HEATED RHETORIC, OUTBREAKS OF VIOLENCE, COUNTROVERSY OVER ARTICLE 370 AND A CURIOUS REALIGNMENT OF FORCES, VOTERS IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR BEGIN GOING TO THE POLLS JUNE 30 TO ELECT A NEW STATE ASSEMBLY. NO ELECTROAL ALLIANCES WERE FORGED AMONG THE MAJOR CONTENDING PARTIES, THE JANATA, NATIONAL CONFERENCE AND CONGRESS, THUS ENSURING THAT MOST CONTESTS WILL BE THREE CORNERED. THE WIDELY, CLOSELY CONTESTED CHARACTER OF THE LECTION, ITS FREE NATURE, AND TE PARTICIPATION IN IT OF VIRTUALLY ALL ELEMENTS OF STATE POLITICAL LIFE MAKE THE 1977 RACE A NOVEL EPISODE IN THE HISTORY OF THE DISPUTED STATE. ABDULLAH'S NATIONAL CONFERENCE HAS OBVIOUS STRENGTH IN THE VALLEY AND INTHE MUSLIM PARTS OF JAMMU, AND THE CONGRESS PROBABLY RETAINS POCKETS OF SUPPORT BOTH IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR. JANATA HAS INHERITED THE JANA SANGH'S STRONG FOOTHOLD AMONG THE HINDUS OF JAMMU, WHILE IN KASHMIR IT HAS RECEIVED THE BACKING OF

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PAGE 02 NEW DE 09273 01 OF 02 291444Z

TRADITIONAL ANTI-SHEIKH ELEMENTS ANXIOUS TO DEFEAT HIM. THESE ELEMENTS, MANY OF WHOM WERE IN THE PAST IDENTIFIED WITH THE CAUSE OF GREATER AUTONOMY FOR J&K OR EVEN ACCESSION TO PAKISTAN, ARE NOW IN THE IRONIC POSITION OF DEFENDING GOI POLICY BECAUSE OF THEIR ALLIANCE WITH THE NEW RULING PARTY AT THE CENGER. ABDULLAH SHARPLY DEFINED THE BATTLE LINES WITH HIS THREAT OF SECESSION IF THE

STATE'S AUTONOMY UNDER ARTICLE 370 IS ERODED. BY RAISING THIS EMOTIONAL ISSUE, WHICH HAS DOMINATED THE CAMPAIGN THROUGHOUT, THE SHEIKH INEVITABLY INTRODUCED A DEGREE OF TENSION AND COMMUNALISM INTO THE CAMPAIGN. ALTHOUGH CLASHES BETWEEN RIVAL PARTY SUPPORTERS HAVE APPARENTLY DIMINISHED FROM THE LEVEL OF SEVERAL WEEKS AGO, FEELINGS ARE STILL RUNNING HIGH IN THIS HOTLY-CONTESTED ELECTION. THERE ARE CONFLICTING ASSESSMENTS OF THE PULL WHICH ABDULLAH EXERCISES OVER HIS FELLOW VALLEY MUSLIMS, THE IMPACT UPON VOTERS OF HIS HEART ATTACK, THE EXTENT OF POPULAR DISSATISFACTION OVER HIS ACTIONS AS CHIEF MINISTER (PARTICULARLY ENDING THE FOOD SUBSIDY) AND THE EFFECT OF THE HARD CAMPAIGNING IN THE STATE BY THE PRIME MINISTER AND OTHER SENIOR GOI FIGURES. WE AGREE WITH THE LOCAL PUNDITS THAT THE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS ARE MUCH TOO COMPLEX TO CALL. END SUMMARY.

1. MARKED BY ENERGETIC CAMPAIGNING, HEATED RHETORIC, OUTBREAKS OF VIOLENCE, RUMORS OF POSTPONING THE POLL, CONTROVERSY OVER ARTICLE 370, AND A CURIOUS REALIGNMENT OF FORCES, THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN FOR THE 76 SEATS IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR'S LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY IS ABOUT TO WIND UP IN BALLOTING BEGINNING ON JUNE 30. THE ELECTIONS BECAME NECESSARY AFTER THE CONGRESS PARTY'S WITHDRAWAL OF SUPPORT IN LATE MARCH LEFT SHEIKH ABDULLAH'S GOVERNMENT IN A MINORITY POSITION. GOVERNOR(S) RULE WAS IMPOSED ON MARCH 27.

CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 03 NEW DE 09273 01 OF 02 291444Z

2. NO ELECTORAL ALLIANCES WERE FORGED AMONG THE MAJOR CONTENDING PARTIES. WE UNDERSTAND THAT FOLLOWING THE CONGRESS DEFEAT IN THE LOK SABHA POLL, SHEIKH ABDULLAH APPROACHED THE NEW URLING PARTY AT THE CENTER AND SOUGHT TO FORGE AN ELECTORAL UNDERSTANDING WITH IT FOR THE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS. ALTHOUGH ABDULLAH HAS LONG BEEN AN ASSOCIATE OF JAYA PRAKASH NARAYAN, THE EFFORT FOUNDERED. THE JANATA HIGH COMMAND REPORTEDLY DEMANDED TOO HIGH A PRICE FOR ITS COOPERATION: ABDULLAH'S AGREEMENT TO MERGE HIS NATIONAL CONFERENCE INTO THE JANATA PARTY. ABDULLAH, FOR HIS PART, IS SAID TO HAVE INSISTED THAT PROSPECTIVE JANATA CANDIDATES RUN UNDER THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE BANNER, AT LEAST IN THE VALLEY, IN EFFECT MERGING THE JANATA INTO THE ABDULLAH ORGANIZATION AND REVERTING TO THE PRE-1965 POSITION WHEN THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE WAS THE KASHMIR BRANCH OF THE NATIONAL RULING PARTY BUT NOT SUBJECT TO ITS ORGANIZATIONAL DISCIPLINE.

3. WITH THE FAILURE OF EFFORTS AT ELECTORAL UNDERSTANDINGS AND MERGER, THE STATE ELECTIONS WILL FEATURE MAINLY THREE CORNERED CONTESTS, WITH THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE, JANATA, AND CONGRESS COMPETING FOR ALMOST ALL OF THE 76 SEATS. ADDITIONALLY, MINOR PARTY AND INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES ARE ALSO IN THE FIELD,

THE LAST MOSTLY IN JAMMU WHERE MANY ARE CONSIDERED "JANATA REBELS." THE JAMMU PROVINCE OF THE STATE HAS 32 CONSTITUENCIES TO THE VALLEY'S 42 AND LADAKH'S TWO.

4. THE WIDELY AND CLOSELY CONTESTED POLLING AND THE LIKELIHOOD THAT THE VOTE WILL BE CAST AND COUNTED IN A FREE AND FAIR MANNER ARE THE MOST NOTEWORTHY FEATURES OF THIS KASHMIR ELECTION. THE CONTEST THUS STANDS IN SHARP CONTRAST TO THE PAST PATTERN OF ELECTIONS IN THE STATE, PARTICULARLY IN THE VALLEY. SINCE THE STATE'S FIRST ASSEMBLY RACE IN 1952, THE DICE HAVE REPEATEDLY BEEN LOADED IN FAVOR OF THE RULING PARTY, INVARIABLY ALLIED WITH THE CONGRESS GOVERNMENT IN NEW DELHI. THE POTENTIAL OPPOSITION HAS EITHER BEEN OVERAWED OR IMPRISONED, OR, IN THE KEY CASE OF THOSE OBJECTING TO
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CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 04 NEW DE 09273 01 OF 02 291444Z

KASHMIR'S ACCESSION TO INDIA, HAVE BOYCOTTED OR BEEN PREVENTED FROM PARTICIPATING IN THE "LEGITIMATE" POLITICS OF THE STATE AS CONTENDING PARTY ORGANIZATIONS. (SOME HAVE CONTESTED AS INDEPENDENTS.) MANY SEATS WENT UNCONTESTED OR WERE

CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 01 NEW DE 09273 02 OF 02 291605Z
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FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4403
INFO AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 NEW DELHI 9273

ONLY NOMINALLY FOUGHT, AND FLAGRANT RIGGING ASSURED GOVERNING PARTY SUCCESS IN MOST OF THE OTHERS. 1977, WITH THREE MAJOR

POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS REPRESENTING ALMOST ALL ELEMENTS OF KASHMIR POLITICAL LIFE FIGHTING IT OUT IN THE EXPECTATION OF A FAIR COUNT, IS THUS A LARGELY NOVEL EXPERIENCE IN THE POLITICS OF THE STATE.

5. IN THIS UNCUSTOMARY ATMOSPHERE, THERE HAS BEEN A REORDERING OF POLITICAL FORCES. ABDULLAH'S NATIONAL CONFERENCE HAS OBVIOUS STRENGTH IN THE VALLEY AND IN THE MUSLIM MAJORITY AREAS OF JAMMU PROVINCE BUT APPEARS TO HAVE LITTLE SUPPORT IN THE PREDOMINANTLY HINDU AREAS OF JAMMU. CONGRESS APPEARS TO HAVE SOME STRENGTH IN BOTH AREAS. FORMER CHIEF MINISTER MIR QASIM HAS RETURNED TO THE FRAY IN THE VALLEY AND FORMER UNION MINISTER KARAN SINGH IS RALLYING CONGRESS FORCES IN HIS TRADITIONAL JAMMU BASE. JANATA HAS AN IMPORTANT POLITICAL FOOTHOLD IN THAT AREA AS WELL, ESSENTIALLY THE SUPPORT IT INHERITED FROM THE JANA SANGH, LONG AN IMPORTANT FORCE AMONG THE PROVINCE'S HINDU MAJORITY. IN CONTRAST, THE PARTY INHERITED LITTLE BACKING IN THE VALLEY, AND THE SUPPORT IT HAS NOW GARNERED REPRESENTS A CURIOUS REALIGNMENT OF POLITICAL

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 NEW DE 09273 02 OF 02 291605Z

FORCES THERE. MUCH OF THIS SUPPORT APPEARS TO REPRESENT LITTLE MORE THAN A RALLYING OF ANTI-ABDULLAH ELEMENTS. SOME OF THESE SUCH AS GHULAM MOHIUDDIN KARRA, HEAD OF THE ERSTWHILE POLITICAL CONFERENCE (LONG CONSIDERED PRO-PAKISTAN) AND ABDULLAH'S ONETIME ASSOCIATE AND LONGTIME OPPONENT MAULANA MOHAMMED SAYEED MASOODI HAVE BECOME LEADERS OF THE JANATA IN THE VALLEY. THEIR EFFORT TO DEFEAT ABDULLAH HAS BEEN STRONGLY ASSISTED BY THE AWAMI ACTION COMMITTEE HEADED BY MIRWAIZ MAULVI FAROOQ, A POLITICO-RELIGIOUS FIGURE WHO HAS INHERITED HIS FAMILY'S LONGTIME ANTI-ABDULLAH ROLE IN THE CITY OF SRINAGAR.

6. POLITICAL COMMENTATORS HAVE REMARKED ON THE IRONY OF THE RESULTING REALIGNMENT: THESE ANTI-ABDULLAH ELEMENTS, WHO IN THE PAST HAD BEEN IDENTIFIED WITH THE CAUSE OF GREATER AUTONOMY OR EVEN ACCESSION OF THE STATE OF PAKISTAN, NOW FIND THEMSELVES DEFENDING GOI POLICY UNDER THE BANNER OF THE JANATA PARTY--ALL A RESULT OF THEIR PASSION TO DENY THE SHEIK THE CHIEF MINISTERSHIP. AT THE OUTSET OF THE CAMPAIGN, ABDULLAH THREW THE QUESTION OF J&K STATUS INTO SHARP RELIEF AND DEFINED THE BATTLE LINES BY THREATENING THE STATE'S SESSION IF ITS AUTONOMY IS ERODED UNDER ARTICLE 370 (SEE NEW DELHI 7432 AND 7593). ALTHOUGH JANATA AND GOI LEADERS SHARPLY DENIED ANY INTENTIONS OF ABROGATING ARTICLE 370, ABDULLAH CLEARLY SOUGHT TO IDENTIFY FAROOQ, MASOODI AND THE OTHERS WITH THE POLICY OF GREATER INTEGRATION WITH THE REST OF INDIA, BECAUSE THEY HAD GATHERED TOGETHER UNDER THE BANNER OF THE NOW-RULING PARTY IN DELHI. THE SHEKH HAS OF COURSE CHOSEN TO IGNORE THE RECORDS OF THE PREVIOUS TWO YEARS WHEN HE HIMSELF ADOPTED A PRO-INDIA STANCE AS A RESULT OF HIS 1975

KASHMIR ACCORD WITH MRS. GANDHI.

7. ABDULLAH AND BEG MADE THE ISSUE OF THE STATUS OF THE STATE THE MAIN PLANK OF THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE PLATFORM, CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 03 NEW DE 09273 02 OF 02 291605Z

WITH BEG CALLING THE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS A PLEBISCITE ON THE QUESTION OF KASHMIR'S INTERNAL SOVEREIGNTY. OTHER ISSUES ON WHICH THE JANATA HAD INITIALLY HOPED TO CAPITALIZE, SUCH AS ABDULLAH'S CONDUCT AS CHIEF MINISTER, HIS ENDING OF THE FOOD SUBSIDY AND HIS NEPOTISM IN SECURING JOBS FOR HIS RELATIVES, HAVE HAD MINIMAL IMPACT IN THE FACE OF THIS HIGHLY EMOTIONAL ISSUE FOR KASHMIRIS. IN THAT SENSE, THE CAMPAIGN BY KEEPING THE JANATA CONSTANTLY ON THE DEFENSIVE. HIS PLOY MAY HAVE BEEN PHONEY, BUT IT WAS OBVIOUSLY CLEVER AND EFFECTIVE.

8. BY PRESENTING HIMSELF AS THE SOLE DEFENDER OF J&K'S SPECIAL STATUS, THE SHEIKH HAS REPORTEDLY BOOSTED THE MORALE OF HIS PART WORKERS AND HAS INEVITABLY INJECTED A DEGREE OF COMMUNALISM AND TENSION INTO THE CAMPAIGN. AS ABDULLAH OBVIOUSLY RECOGNIZED, NO ISSUE IS AS QUICK AND AS CERTAIN TO AROUSE KASHMIRI POLITICAL PASSIONS AS THAT OF THE STATE'S AUTONOMY. JANATA LEADERS CHARGE THAT BY RAISING HIS SECESSION THREAT ABDULLAH HAS DELIBERATELY CHARGED THE POLITICAL ATMOSPHERE AND AROUSED COMMUNAL PASSIONS TO THE POINT WHERE CLASHES BETWEEN RIVAL GROUPS WERE UNAVOIDABLE. GOING FURTHER, THEY ALLEGE THAT YOUNG NATIONAL CONFERENCE HOOLIGANS HAVE TERRORIZED AND ATTACKED JANATA WORKERS. NATIONAL CONFERENCE LEADERS RETORT THAT THE JANATA FOR ITS PART HAS INSTIGATED VIOLENCE AND POINT TO THE CLASHES IN AND AROUND ANANTNAG JUNE 11 (SEE NEW DELHI 8426) WHICH THEY CLAIM WERE PROVOKED BY MAULVI FAROOQ'S FOLLOWERS. ALTHOUGH THE GOI GIVES EVERY INDICATION OF MAKING GOOD ON ITS EXPRESSED DETERMINATION TO ENSURE A FREE, FAIR AND PEACEFUL POLL, AND THERE HAVE BEEN NO RECENT REPORTS OF CLASHES, FEELINGS AMONG CONTENDING PARTIES REPORTED STILL ARE RUNNING HIGH.

9. FEW POLITICAL OBSERVERS ARE HAZARDING GUESSES ABOUT THE OUTCOME OF THIS UNUSUAL CONTEST. THERE ARE CONFLICTING ASSESSMENTS OF THE PULL THAT ABDULLAH EXERCISES OVER HIS FELLOW VALLEY MUSLIMS. WHILE THERE IS GENERAL AGREEMENT THAT CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 04 NEW DE 09273 02 OF 02 291605Z

THE SHEIKH REMAINS THE SINGLE MOST POWERFUL FIGURE IN KASHMIR, IT IS DIFFICULT TO EVALUATE TO WHAT DEGREE HIS PRESTIGE HAS BEEN

DIMINISHED BY HIS CONDUCT AS CHIEF MINISTER OVER THE PAST TWO YEARS AND HIS EARLIER DECISION TO ALIGN WITH INDIA, AND HOW MUCH POPULAR RSENTMENT EXISTS OVER SUCH DECISIONS AS ENDING THE FOOD SUBSIDY. ABDULLAH'S HEART ATTACK TWO WEEKS AGO INJECTED A NEW AND UNCERTAIN ELEMENT INTO THE ATMOSPHERE. ALTHOUGH IT HAS PREVENTED HIM FROM ANY FURTHER CAMPAIGNING. WE UNDERSTAND HIS ILLNESS HAS WON HIM CONSIDERABLE POPULAR SYMPATHY. IN FACT, PRAYER SERVICES FOR THE SHEIKH'S RECOVERY AT MOSQUES AND SHRINES HAVE OFTEN TURNED INTO NATIONAL CONFERENCE RALLIES. JANATA LEADERS HAVE SOUGHT TO BLUNT THE POTENTIAL SYMPATHY VOTE BY QUESTIONING WHETHER HIS MEDICAL CONDITION WILL ENABLE HIM TO RULE IF HIS PARTY GAINS A MAJORITY. ANOTHER IMPONDERABLE FACTOR IS THE EFFECTOF THE ENERGETIC CAMPAIGNING IN THE STATE BY THE PRIME MINISTER AND OTHER SENIOR GOI LEADERS IN RECENT WEEKS. FINALLY, THE STRENGTH AND APPEAL OF THE CONGRESS, PARTICULARLY IN AREAS WHERE IT TRADITIONALLY HAS HAD A FOLLOWING, SUCH AS JAMMU, REMAINS A QUESTION MARK. UNLIKE THE REST OF INDIA, THE EMERGENCY NEVER IMPACTED ON J&K AND THE LOCAL CONGRESS UNIT CONSEQUENTLY DOES NOT BEAR THE ONUS OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR "EXCESSES" AS IN OTHER STATES. GIVEN THIS UNIQUE ALIGNMENT OF FORCES AND PERSONALITIES, WE AGREE WITH LOCAL PUNDITS THAT THE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS ARE MUCH TOO COMPLEX TO CALL.

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